

Esther Phillips: 'Just a singer'

by Larry Friske

DETROIT — Esther Phillips has long been considered one of the truly great blues singers. She's always been more than "just" a blues singer but once categorized in the music business, one's career can be limited to certain clubs and audiences. Along with her



management and record label CTI/Kudu, she's embarked on a conscious effort to expand her audience beyond the blues circuit.

So instead of playing the Watts Club Mozambique here her tour recently carried her into a newly expanded and remodeled lounge on Detroit's near westside, the King's Row Showcase. She may miss the more intimate atmosphere. She commented during the show "You aren't this reserved at Mozambique."

Phillips warmed the small but appreciative weeknight audience by a combination of her talent and polished professional approach to her work.

At first her voice might sound unduly sharp or harsh. It is certainly not one with a lush, warm or conventionally romantic texture. But her voice bites through all sentimentality and strikes us right on. It's a voice that above all

else communicates, unique and unforgettable. It's one that's especially appropriate and effective with the tough lyrics of many blues songs. The musical high of the show, and one that also turned the audience around, was the treatment she gave to a long, personal narrative, "Esther's Blues."

She also sang many of her current songs during her nightly appearances, such as the Gamble/Huff number "One Night Affair" and the popular Grover Washington hit "Mr. Magic."

Between sets she spoke about singing and songs with *MFP*.

"My style of singing . . . ahh, that's very difficult. I don't know. I just sing songs that appeal to me, in tempos mostly to stay in tune with the discos and the kids and what's happening today.

"(I like) any song that has something to say, that has a story . . . with lyrics that are strong and can be projected. It doesn't matter what kind of song, from country-western to blues, jazz. Oh yes, I love to sing the blues. Because most blues songs do have a strong lyric and a good story.

"The melody has a lot to do with whether I can take a song and do what I want with it. With some songs I'm not even trying, because they're written in such a way that you have to do them exactly as they are. Which explains why there are so many songs I won't do because they don't fit me.

"I don't think I could be called a pop singer or a blues singer for that matter. I'm just a singer. I'm not in any category. I can sing anything. If it's a jazz tune, and it comes out blues, I'm not trying to make it that way — that's just the way it comes out . . ."

Rarely hearing her scat singing on records, *MFP* asked Phillips if she had ever done much of that kind of jazz singing.

"Sometimes. Not often though. No, I did last night on "And I Love Him" if you can call that scattin'. I don't call that scattin'. What I do on the *Burning Live* album on the end of 'And I Love Him,' before I did the hum-like. I don't really call that scattin'. Scattin' to me is what like Ella Fitzgerald does and Sarah Vaughan."



Working with material that covers such a wide range, Phillips named a few composers she would like to sing more of.

"I'd like to get into doing some Gene McDaniel things. I recorded one song, 'Disposable Society,' which he wrote. But I'd really like to get into recording some more of his stuff. And then there's Alan Touissant who's very big. I recorded his *Performance and Whisper to A Scream*. Jim Price which I did one of his things on this album, 'I Could Stand A Little Rain.'"

Since signing with CTI in 1971 Phillips

exciting and unique arrangement by guitarist Joe Beck, primed to receive maximum airplay on radio and discotheques.

Taking a different approach from the production end, this is her first Kudu album done without the services of Phillips' music director Pee Wee Ellis. "What A Difference" is meeting with some success, supposedly now the number two disco hit in New York.

Phillips explained that this, her fifth album with Creed Taylor, continues the growth and momentum of her career. "(I approached the album) with a lot of hesitation. It was Creed's idea. He's the producer and it's his idea to go that route, with Joe Beck. (We work together) fine, you have to because the producer is a very important part of the recording. It's like six in one hand and a half-dozen in the other. You have to get along and work together in order to come up with an album like that. We all get together and pick the material together, and we go into the studio and if it doesn't work, the song doesn't work, we just take it out and get something else."

It seems like Esther Phillips has been on the road ever since her days with Johnny Otis beginning in 1949. Currently she's as busy as ever. Not having seen her Los Angeles home since leaving to record *What A Difference* in April, she told *MFP*:

"The tour's doing very well. We have one week, four days in Milwaukee, at Teddy's, then I go to Chicago to Ratso's. Pee Wee Ellis organized the band for me. He's still my music director. He comes out and joins us on occasional gigs — like he'll be in Chicago when we get there. They've revamped and changed a few musicians but the drummer's been with me almost a year — Victor Smith."

The ambitious management of King's Row is making a concerted attempt at booking entertainers with a more national reputation. It's a comfortable and conveniently located club but Esther Phillips had some difficulty in overcoming the inherent formality and distance created by the stage arrangement. It's a large room, some 300 capacity, and is designed along the lines of Miami's *Bachelor III*. The bar is placed far

enough stage left so that it creates a minimum of interference with the entertainment.

It's a long way from Johnny Otis' club in Watts where, on one talent night, Esther won \$10 and the eye of the owner. He arranged for her recording with Savoy Records and by the following year, 1950, Esther pushed no less



than six different singles onto Billboard's R&B charts.

"Double Crossing Blues" sold over a million copies, and "Mistrustin' Blues" climbed all the way to the top. This at the age of 14. "I missed most of the fun of being a teenager."

Ever since, the blues has been Phillips heart and soul. Of course she's familiar with most of the great blues singers, Memphis Slim and Eddie Vinson being two of her favorites. But Dinah Washington holds a very special place. She won her amateur show off a Washington record out at the time, "Baby Get Lost." "The only one I ever took from was Dinah."

But *What A Difference A Day Makes* was most on her mind.

"The nice thing about this album is that it appeals to all audiences, the kids and everybody, the elderly people who do the bossa nova off of it. They're all finding their own dance off of it, which is great."